



Achieving for Children's Better by Design – Evaluation Summary

Background

Achieving for Children (AfC) is a social enterprise company created by the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames to provide their children's services.

In 2015, AfC successfully bid for one year of funding from the Department for Education (DfE) Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. The funding was for AfC to deliver and evaluate a project called Better by Design (BBD). BBD is an ambitious new programme developed by AfC in collaboration with the University of Birmingham. BBD comprises a different way of working with young people who present particularly challenging behaviours and is based on significant existing research. It combines social learning principles with collaborative problem solving approaches, in order to build the skills and capabilities of young people in out-of-borough care settings or on the edge of care locally.

Aims and objectives

The aim of BBD is to work alongside young people in the programme to help them manage their own challenges, difficulties and relationships in a different and more constructive way, and thereby improve their behaviours and the way they relate to others. This should lead to improved life chances for the young people by improving placement stability within foster care settings and hence reduce the need for young people to be looked after in high-cost out-of-borough settings far away from the family home; improving relationships within the family home to reduce the number of children going into care; and, for the young people to improve their education attendance and reduce anti-social behaviour.

The project aims to migrate young people in out-of-borough residential care back to local foster carers trained in BBD ('Innovation Mentors'), via a short stay residential setting where they work with specially recruited 'Innovation Family Workers' also trained in BBD. The Innovation Family Workers will also work with young people on the edge of care with the aim of preventing escalation to being taken into care.

Evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were to explore a number of issues: how well the programme was implemented and how well it fits with existing systems; what the outcomes are for the young people (and their families in the case of the edge of care side of the programme) participating in BBD; how cost-effective the programme is; and what can be learned about 'what works' and scalability.

The evaluation is based on a mixed methods approach including documentary reviews, qualitative questionnaires and stakeholder interviews. Its design comprised two parts: a process evaluation and an impact evaluation. This evaluation study was carried out by Frontier Economics and Ipsos MORI from April 2015 to March 2016.

Findings

Given the challenges associated with implementation of BBD within a short timeframe, only a very small number of young people participated in BBD by March 2016. This means that a robust impact evaluation is not possible at this stage. The process evaluation revealed important findings for implementing such innovative programmes, including the following:

- The short timeframe to design, implement and operationalise this sizeable and complex project was very challenging – the BBD project team would have benefited from more time before operationalisation to deliver training; design the referral pathways; prepare the short-term residential setting; identify appropriate BBD participants; and communicate with the wider AfC about the programme;
- A qualified social worker proved a necessary addition to the BBD management team, especially since Innovation Family Workers have been deliberately recruited without social care experience (though with significant weight on excellent inter-relational skills);
- The process of recruiting the Innovation Family Workers was successful in meeting its objectives though recruiting foster carers proved challenging; and
- The cost effectiveness of BBD was significantly affected by the lower-than-anticipated utilisation of the short-stay residential hub.

Cost effectiveness

The costs analysis shows that over the evaluation period April 2015 to February 2016, costs of the residential setting exceeded the financial savings from avoided out-of-borough residential care by £369,000. This is driven by the lower-than-anticipated number of young people going through the short-stay setting and the high fixed costs associated with a residential setting. It has not been possible to assess the cost effectiveness of the programme as a whole at this stage due to the limited time the edge of care side of the programme has been operational (as at March 2016).

Recommendations

Although an impact evaluation has not been possible at this stage, we recommend data on outcomes for the young people and costs of BBD continue to be collected, monitored and evaluated. An evaluation should be carried out in 12-18 months time when more young people have been through the BBD programme.

In particular, AfC should consider how best to maximise the utilisation of the short-stay residential setting given the high fixed costs associated with this side of the programme.

AfC should also learn from the process evaluation in terms of: ensuring appropriate and timely recruitment, training and on-going support in relation to Innovation Family Workers and Innovation Mentors; ensuring a clear and effective referral pathway into BBD for young people in out-of-borough care and on the edge of care; and developing and implementing an appropriate communications strategy across AfC and its partners.

Changes considered in services in response to evaluation findings

- AfC is committed to the BBD programme and is intending to provide the service without the short-stay residential setting element in 2016/17 and to source its own in-borough residential setting in 2017/18.
- AfC has reconsidered the selection of cases and going forward BBD will be considered as an early intervention and the referral pathway will change;
- AfC will continue to monitor all elements of the BBD programme and continually learn and adapt its design, including the supervision of Innovation Family Workers and the approach to recruiting foster carers.

The DFE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford

(www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk.) A full copy of this report can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications